
Florida's Community Corrections: How We've Survived Three Years of Budget Cuts

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In February 2001, an arsonist set fire to a Department of Corrections probation office located in the northwest Florida city of Chipley. The building was destroyed, as were supervision files, furniture, and equipment. Because it happened in the middle of the night, no one was injured. The probation officers assigned to that office responded by setting up shop in the parking lot of the probation office. They established makeshift offices by using folding chairs and storing files and supplies in the trunks of their cars. They shared laptop computers. A nearby prison, Holmes Correctional Institution (CI), offered temporary office space, and the local Washington County Sheriff's Office allowed probation officers to meet probationers in its office space. Staff moved into their own temporary building 2 months later. There was no interruption in service or the supervision of offenders throughout this ordeal.

Then the unthinkable happened. The arsonist struck again in August. This time the losses were greater, though there was still no loss of life. More than half of the office files were destroyed, and all of the furniture was burned. Staff launched back into action, setting up shop again at Holmes CI. Four months later, they were back in a temporary building. Again, there was no interruption of service or supervision of offenders. In fact, the Chipley probation office later won a statewide Davis Productivity Award for its hard work and innovative approaches to solving the unexpected problems that came with these disasters. Particular note was made of the officers' flexibility in dealing with adversity and their willingness to do whatever it took to carry out their duties.

Responding to the Unthinkable

I tell this story because it is a good analogy for the last 3 years of budget cuts that the Florida Department of Corrections' Office of Community Corrections has endured. While these cuts may not have been as unexpected as the fires, they have devastated us in some ways and made us stronger in others. They have also forced us to be innovative in solving the unexpected problems that accompanied them.

The Florida Department of Corrections is responsible for more than 73,000 inmates and almost 153,000 offenders on community supervision. Offenders may be on probation, parole, community control, electronic monitoring via global positioning satellite (GPS) and radio frequency, sex offender supervision, drug offender supervision, or under other forms of supervision. Their offenses range from petty theft to murder.

On August 30, 1999, we had 2,617 probation officers supervising about 150,000 offenders. As of May 5, 2002, we had 2,335 probation officers supervising 153,000 offenders. In the current fiscal year (FY 2002-03), 181 vacant Community Corrections positions have been cut, saving \$7.5 million.

Focusing on Our Goals

The cuts have forced us to make some difficult decisions, but they have also helped us to focus on our goals: ensuring public safety, keeping caseloads manageable, and avoiding layoffs, if possible.

We knew that a reduction in positions was a possibility, so we prepared for it before the first cuts were announced by not filling vacant positions. Thus, when the first cuts became a reality, we didn't have to lay off anyone, though we did lose those positions. In fact, to date we have lost more than 290 certified correctional probation officer positions and have had our budget reduced by several million dollars. Our officer-to-support-staff ratio has gone from 3:1 to 7:1, requiring officers to spend more of their time filing, typing, entering data, and answering phones.

In the wake of budget cuts, officers collected and disbursed over \$31 million for victims of crime. Recently officers were asked to begin collecting DNA samples for the Florida Department of Law Enforcement from statutorily designated offenders. Once again our officers accepted the challenge and to date have collected more than 8,000 samples.

As the budget cuts took effect, we began dealing with the reality that we had more work, fewer staff, and less money. We asked the field staff statewide to give us ideas on how we could cut back without reducing services. Based on their responses, we compiled a survey to solicit input from all staff. The results turned out to provide very useful information. More than 90% of the staff's ideas have been used to ease workload and offset the effects of the budget cuts. The only ideas not used were those prohibited by state statute or that might have the effect of compromising public safety.

Ideas that were implemented include:

- ◆ Eliminating the requirement—later reinstated—to re-verify residence and employment of probationers every 90 days (except for sex offenders and certain other groups);
- ◆ Eliminating investigative functions that were redundant and not required by statute;
- ◆ Using electronic transfer request and response instead of the U.S. Mail;
- ◆ Having Probation and Parole Specialists enter intake and sentence structure information directly into the database while interviewing offenders;

- ◆ Automating the process of completing risk and needs assessment forms;
- ◆ Automating the process of coordinating information for prison post-sentence investigations;
- ◆ Eliminating an outdated and time-consuming post-sentence investigation, conducted by probation officers after an offender's commitment to prison (our officers continue to assist prison classification staff when they need more information to classify an inmate, but they now have more time to supervise offenders); and
- ◆ Eliminating officers' completion of the Criminal Punishment Code score sheet—Community Corrections assists the State Attorney's office by giving them access to our database and training on the use of our computer screens.

It is interesting that the majority of staff statewide soundly rejected several ideas that field staff had suggested to management, even though these ideas would have reduced the amount of paperwork officers had to do. Their reasoning was that, although officers do not enjoy certain paperwork, the suggested changes could have compromised public safety.

Dodging a Bullet

In addition to the budget cuts we were already experiencing, we faced another crisis recently when the Florida Legislature considered cutting more than 400 Community Corrections officer positions. This would have resulted in layoffs of almost 200 officers, so it was an unexpected setback for most officers and severely affected their morale. For some time, staff found it hard to concentrate on work, as the anticipated layoffs represented almost all the officers hired statewide in the last 3 to 4 years. Agency directors and Community Corrections regional directors traveled around the state to visit with staff. They set up a centralized rumor hot line and a suggestion line to ensure that accurate information was disseminated to all staff. Electronic mail messages, staff meetings, and telephone calls were used to keep staff informed of the situation.

The union that represents Florida probation officers and supervisors launched a campaign to help save the officers' positions by lobbying the governor's office and the legislature. In the end, the legislators kept the cuts in their budget, but the governor, who is strongly backed by the officers' union, vetoed the budget line item and restored the funds to retain most of the officer positions. More importantly, no staff layoffs were needed to achieve the budget reduction.

During the budget cutting process, the entire Department of Corrections consistently used a collaborative process, bringing together staff from the secretary's office, budget office, legislative office, and Community Corrections to develop scenarios that would meet the budget requirements and still maintain supervision services as close as possible to normal and ensure public safety. These

ad-hoc meetings, along with regular management meetings and town hall meetings with line staff, have been helpful in keeping everyone focused.

Focusing on Big-Ticket Items

The changes suggested by staff were helpful in cutting back on paperwork and giving officers more time in the field, but we knew we had to make additional, substantial changes to accommodate our shrinking budget. We focused on four areas: leases, courtroom officers, equipment, and overtime.

- ◆ **Leases.** We began consolidating staff in offices as leases expired. This has saved money and boosted officer morale, because the alternative was moving to the squad room concept, which tends to be a noisy, open area that lacks privacy for the officers and offenders. Officers said they preferred traditional offices, even if their workspace had to be smaller.
- ◆ **Courtroom officers.** We reassigned full-time certified officers from the courtroom and put them in the field, while shifting their administrative duties to paraprofessional support staff. This has produced a mixed result. Although it makes better use of certified officers, it has lessened our impact on the court process and hurt some judges' feelings. The judges had come to rely on our staff for their expertise, and their presence generally resulted in higher credibility for the department's role in the criminal justice system.
- ◆ **Equipment.** We cut back in purchasing equipment and software. As a result, not all officers have their own PCs, which limits their access to department databases and software applications designed to streamline their workload.
- ◆ **Overtime.** We virtually eliminated overtime, except for emergencies.

Innovative Ideas

Once we had cut expenses as much as possible, we knew that we had to get creative in order to maintain our standards of supervision with fewer officers. This realization led to some innovative approaches.

- ◆ **Fugitive Apprehension Coordination Team.** We created the Fugitive Apprehension Coordination Team (FACT), a team of five officers assigned to the Office of Community Corrections. FACT coordinates and tracks down offenders reported as absconders from supervision. (Absconders are offenders whose whereabouts are unknown by the officer despite an exhaustive search.) In the past, field officers attempted to locate absconders on their own. Now the field officer calls or e-mails FACT officers when he/she has an absconder, giving the FACT officers suggestions for locating the absconder. The FACT officers tackle the cases involving violent offenders and sex offenders first, using several databases to cull additional facts about the absconder. They, in turn, give this information to local, county, state, and federal law enforcement to facilitate apprehension of the absconder. The statewide absconder population decreased from 46,381 in February 2001 to

45,003 offenders on March 31, 2002, which means there are 1,378 fewer cases for field officers to deal with now.

- ◆ **Officer training.** All officers are required to complete 40 hours of retraining annually. In the past, this was done piecemeal throughout the year, and it was time-consuming and expensive to arrange the officers' time off and travel. To save time and resources, we implemented a "block" delivery system, which provided the entire 40 hours of training in 1 week at one location. Officers also will soon have the option of using a job-training book, a pocket-sized training notebook that contains all training information. Whenever the officer has some down time, he or she can train individually, on the job.
- ◆ **Law enforcement support.** We also looked to our law enforcement neighbors for assistance in supervision and surveillance of offenders to supplement our own offender contacts. Partnerships that were being developed before the budget cuts have increased as the need to "do more with less" has affected both our agency and law enforcement agencies. These partnerships are positive for both entities. Supplementing visits by correctional probation officers with visits by police and sheriff's deputies to offenders' houses saves time and doesn't compromise supervision. Sex offenders, violent offenders, and those on community control are generally the focus of visits from law enforcement officers.
- ◆ **Coordination with related agencies.** The Office of Community Corrections works closely with the Florida Parole Commission in the development of procedures for the release, supervision, and revocation of offenders on various types of post-release supervision. We also work closely with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement in the areas of sex offender identification, career criminals, and DNA collection. Recently several agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation visited Florida to audit the process by which information was entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) system. The agents commented that seldom do they find the kind of cooperation between agencies that they found between the Florida Department of Corrections and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.
- ◆ **Interstate Compact.** We have also shifted and centralized the monitoring of all Interstate Compact cases statewide from the field to the central office level, freeing up the field staff to concentrate on supervision.

Technological Innovations

Given almost daily changes and upgrades in technology, we also took a close look at how we could improve by using the latest technological innovations. Improvements have been steady, enabling officers to perform more tasks electronically and making the gathering of information less dependent on site visits, for example, to the clerk of court offices.

We have made significant progress in several areas of focus:

- ◆ Our electronic monitoring programs, including the GPS, are viable and staffed appropriately.
- ◆ Staff safety is always a concern, so safety and communication equipment such as cell phones, pagers, and police radios continues to be available.
- ◆ Geo-mapping technology is being employed in several circuits to ensure that sex offenders are not living too close to schools, day care centers, or parks. This technology also frees officers from having to spend valuable time measuring the distances from these areas in person.
- ◆ An automated risk classification system has been developed to streamline the task of assessing the potential risk of probationers.
- ◆ We are conducting a modified operational review of all the circuits in the state, using the offender database system and reports generated by our Bureau of Research and Data Analysis to analyze 17 key areas of operations that have related review standards. This review is now accomplished by four staff members; it had required more than 25 staff dedicated to each circuit for an entire week. Measurement reports were created for key areas, enabling our Bureau of Research and Data Analysis to detail how well an officer is performing duties that directly relate to safeguarding the community.

Good News/Bad News

Despite the negative impact of budget reductions, there has been some good news—and one lucky break. The lucky break is that the supervision population has remained static in recent years and even decreased in some areas, negating some of the impact of position reductions. Current caseload ratios are reasonable in most areas, although caseloads in certain areas are rising above normal levels because vacant positions have been left unfilled for longer than 1 year. This situation has been addressed by looking at contact standards for minimum-risk cases only; serious offenders remain under the same standards. Contacts with “less risky” offenders have been reduced to concentrate on the serious offenders.

In other good news, travel dollars for operations and supervision have not been reduced, and state vehicles have been made available for supervision purposes in limited circumstances. All mandatory and statutorily mandated training is intact. On the downside, fewer dollars are available for travel to conferences, which reduces networking opportunities and the education value of training sessions conducted at conferences. However, Community Corrections itself is now providing more specialized training (e.g., in officer safety) using agency staff, which has led to more consistency statewide. Less training has been scheduled that requires expenditures of travel and expense dollars.

Internal and External Constraints

As with any large organization, we face constraints in our budgeting process. Perhaps the biggest internal constraint faced by Community Corrections has been our lack of autonomy in making budget decisions. Decisions on training, travel (non-offender related), administrative reassignments, vacant positions, and changes in procedures are in our control, but they are generally made after receiving the available funds from the Budget Division of the Department of Corrections. Position cuts are determined by unit cost as much as by operational value. Surpluses and deficits alike must be shared among various divisions to ensure the good of the agency as a whole.

Some external constraints we face are the statutory limits on caseload ratios and services and collective bargaining rules. For example, officers with a caseload of sex offenders may supervise no more than 40 cases at any time, compared to most other type of caseloads which are much larger. Such statutory limits restrict the areas available for cutting. Personnel rules related to the officers' union contract sometimes make it difficult to move staff to areas in need. In addition, the state's large geographic area can make lease decisions difficult when choosing where to cut dollars. Finally, there is a limited amount of money within the Community Corrections budget that can be shifted from one funding category to another. Funding for specific classes of offenders is legislatively mandated.

Measuring the Effect of Cuts

The Office of Community Corrections has a number of mechanisms in place to measure recidivism, violations, revocations, and restitution, but the budget cuts and related effects are too recent to be effectively measured at this point. However, our agency continues to closely monitor legislation that may impact the workload of probation officers, as well as budget actions that may affect positions. We are reviewing monthly and quarterly statistical reports, which monitor admissions, losses, investigation workload, and caseload ratios in all areas of the state, to ensure logistically sufficient allocation of resources. Our Bureau of Research and Data Analysis also publishes an annual report entitled "Five-Year Trends in Community Corrections." The Office of Community Corrections works closely with other government oversight agencies, such the Criminal Justice Estimating Conference and the Florida Corrections Commission, in providing information that they use to develop proposals for the legislature and governor's office.

While we may not have seen the end of budget cuts, we recognize that we have been lucky in some respects. We have avoided laying off staff while maintaining our quality of supervision and public safety. This agency has not been hit as hard as some other agencies in Florida, which have actually been divided or abolished, and for that we are grateful. And like the officers in the Chipley office, who demonstrated tremendous grace under fire when an arsonist burned down their office—twice—we, the Florida Department of Corrections Community Corrections department, plan to be equally innovative and committed to getting the job done, regardless of the obstacles. ■

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